

***From the
Editor's Desk***

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The usual autumn cycle of conferences and meetings offers the happy opportunity to catch up with colleagues on the challenges, strategies, and experiences of our continuing commitment to fulfill the metropolitan university mission. This year, I heard two broad themes in conversations with administrators and faculty from some of the member institutions of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

A first theme was that many people are excited by the growing variety of successful approaches used to discover and deliver knowledge through effective university-community partnerships. A second theme was that we need to do a better job of explaining the metropolitan university and its mission to the rest of higher education and the public at large.

The first theme is reflected in the content of this current issue of *Metropolitan Universities*. Jill Russell and Richard Flynn have assembled an impressive sampling of different models of cross-sector collaboration, which they define as partnerships that bring together large, formal organizational sectors, such as local government, business, schools, or higher education, to address critically important community needs with the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness that only authentic collaboration can bring. This collection of articles is valuable in part because of their willingness to be reflective about what worked and what did not work in bringing the collaborative groups together and in designing strategies for action.

The second theme is a growing concern about the fact that metropolitan universities are often subjected to misplaced criticism and are misrepresented by common measures of institutional performance in higher education. We are willing to be held accountable for our performance, but find that most existing measures do not reflect the goals of our mission or the characteristics of our students and faculty. This issue also contains an article relevant to this urgent challenge by Steve Chambers and Arun Sanjeev, who report a timely and important study of performance indicators and metropolitan institutions. Drawing on the experience of Wichita State University, they propose new perspectives on several commonly used performance indicators, such as graduation rates, that

typically fail to characterize metropolitan institutions and their students accurately. Their results should inspire more focused discussion as metropolitan institutions struggle to find appropriate quantitative measures to represent the goals and characteristics of their missions.

Most states are now experimenting with incorporating performance measures and some are linking them to planning discussions and budgeting procedures. The problem is that the most commonly used measures of institutional performance are based on traditional institutions. We are often seen as failing to measure up to the traditional benchmarks of productivity and performance, despite the reality that these indicators do not reflect our students' goals and patterns of attendance or the range of community-university interactions that are central to the work of metropolitan universities. While we may believe, individually and collectively, that we should be judged by more appropriate standards, we have not yet presented a compelling, quantitative argument that is based on documentation of the unique features of the metropolitan mission. Appropriate standards of quality and performance *can* be developed to track the objectives of metropolitan universities, but there is clearly an urgent need for us to conduct a quantitative study of our institutions so that we can build and sustain a valid national database illustrative of our distinctive goals and characteristics.

At last, however, real progress is being made in developing an accurate statistical portrait of the characteristics of metropolitan universities and the attendant measures that can be used to assess our levels of performance appropriately. The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities has made a commitment to address these needs, both through attention at its upcoming conference, and in direct investment in research. The topic will be the subject of a major preconference workshop at the next Coalition conference, February 22-24, 1998, hosted by the University of Texas-San Antonio, where I will lead a panel discussion on approaches to developing an accurate database on metropolitan institutions. The workshop's outcomes should include the identification of specific characteristics that most define our mission.

The ideas generated in the workshop will also inform the work of a research group I have organized with the support of the Coalition. This team of administrators, faculty, and institutional researchers is beginning to work together to document the key characteristics of metropolitan institutions, identify existing data sources, develop reporting formats and strategies that can be sustained over time, and design unique surveys and instruments. The project will take several

years, no doubt, but we are on our way to developing a valid, reliable, and sustained system for building an accurate portrait of metropolitan universities. The outcome of this work will be invaluable in helping to build a national understanding of the metropolitan mission, and in encouraging more representative assessments and rankings of institutional performance on local, state, and national levels.

This work will require considerable experimentation, testing, and validation, if it is to successfully alter the strongly held traditions associated with institutional performance measurement. I encourage your participation in the upcoming conference and workshop and your support when the research team asks for your institution to take part in data studies and pilot tests for instruments and reporting formats. I plan to keep you updated on our progress in future issues of this journal, and welcome your ideas and questions through your calls or e-mail messages. This is an exciting project with important consequences for all of us. Your support is essential to its success.

Metropolitan Universities: Who Are We?

We are located in or near the urban center of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) with a population of at least 250,000.

We are universities, public and private, whose mission includes teaching, research, and professional service. We offer both graduate and undergraduate education in the liberal arts and two or more professional fields. The latter programs are strongly practice-oriented and make extensive use of clinical sites in the metropolitan area.

The majority of our students come from our metropolitan regions. Our students are highly diverse in age, ethnic and racial identity, and socioeconomic background, reflecting the demographic characteristics of their region. Many come to us by transfer from community colleges and other baccalaureate institutions, many are place-bound employees and commuters, and many require substantially longer than the traditional time to graduate, for financial and other personal reasons.

We are oriented toward and identify with our regions, proudly and by deliberate design. Our programs respond to regional needs while striving for national excellence.

We are strongly interactive. We are dedicated to serving as intellectual and creative resources to our metropolitan regions in order to contribute to their economic development, social health, and cultural vitality, through education, research, and professional outreach. We are committed to collaboration and cooperation with the many communities and clienteles in our metropolitan regions and to helping to bridge the socioeconomic, cultural, and political barriers among them.

We are shaping and adapting our own structures, policies, and practices to enhance our effectiveness as key institutions in the lives of our metropolitan regions and their citizens.

